



## One of our National Treasures

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**'One of our National Treasures': the biography of the skull  
of Turlough Carolan the Blind Harper**

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**<title>‘One of our National Treasures’**  
**<subtitle>The biography of the skull of Turlough Carolan the Blind Harper**

<running header> ‘One of our National Treasures’

Elizabeth Crooke

*Many Irish musicians will have heard of Turlough Carolan (1670-1738), frequently referred to as the Blind Harper. Less well known is that his skull was exhumed in 1750, twelve years after he was buried. Since that year and throughout the nineteenth century, a human skull, declared to be that of Carolan, was displayed in various prestigious locations. In the early twentieth century it was received by the National Museum of Ireland, where it still resides. This paper traces the story of the skull from grave to museum stores, providing an insight into the fascination exerted by remains of the deceased and the special significance given in Ireland to the remains of a revered musician. The skull is where multiple histories meet: it embodies a record of customs in rural Ireland; it tells us something of the display of collections by Irish gentry and the middle classes; and it is a route into exploring the cultural meanings of our collections.*

In most museums there are objects of uncertain authenticity and questionable provenance. These objects may have been in the collection for decades, well beyond the memory of current staff, and their acquisition could well have preceded the introduction of documentation standards followed today. Few, however, will be as arresting as the object in the National Museum of Ireland which forms the subject of this paper: a human skull carefully held in a custom-made glass cabinet and sitting on a velvet cushion, labelled ‘HH: 2013.67 (temp)’. Mounted on the glass case a small brass plaque reads: ‘SKULL OF TURLOUGH CAROLAN THE LAST OF THE IRISH BARDS PRESENTED BY ARK MASONIC LODGE No. 10 1926’ (Fig. 1).

Turlough Carolan<sup>1</sup> (1670-1738), frequently referred to as the Blind Harper, was a travelling harper who mostly played for local people and gentry in the counties of Connacht and south Ulster.<sup>2</sup> Taught the instrument by Mrs Mary McDermott Roe of County Roscommon, he adopted the life of an ‘itinerant harper’ travelling by horse with a guide; the musician Joan Trimble described this as a ‘romantic picture’, ‘that of two men on horseback, one a blind harper – the other, his guide, carrying his harp’.<sup>3</sup> Although he died almost three centuries ago, memory of Carolan lives on in his music, which is still played and celebrated nationally.<sup>4</sup> Unknown to many who celebrate his work is the story of Carolan’s skull, which was removed from his grave in 1750 and, passed through the generations, became an object that was admired, disagreed over and eventually enshrined in a national collection. Above ground the object was both a spectacle and subject of veneration, which people travelled many miles to see; each location provided the skull with a different meaning for those who viewed it. First displayed in a niche in a rural Irish graveyard in the early 1800s it was reported as forcibly taken for the private collection of John Caldwell of Castle Caldwell (d1839), County Fermanagh. When this collection was dismantled, the skull was purchased for a museum created by a businessman in the town of Newry (County Down). Decades later it languished in a Masonic Lodge in Belfast. Now it is located in a purpose-made glass case in the National Museum of Ireland stores. Through the decades, almost from the moment it was taken from

the graveyard a question, underlying both the appeal and the importance of the skull, is the question of whether it is the genuine skull of Carolan: its authenticity is entangled in conflicting stories, including speculation around the phrenology of the skull.

The approach taken in this paper draws upon the field that considers the biography of things to reveal social and cultural life.<sup>5</sup> It highlights the 'key moments in the career of this thing',<sup>6</sup> demonstrating how the status and meaning of the object has changed over the course of time. By considering the history of the Carolan skull we are offered insights into how we use things as material representations of status or aspiration.<sup>7</sup> The account is also one of legacy – of how we use objects and collections to shape the way in which we might be remembered or wish to be regarded. Crucially, two factors gave Carolan's skull importance. First, the skull is the remains of a revered musician, who was held in high esteem during his lifetime and whose memory was maintained into the nineteenth century, part fuelled by rising nationalism of the time that defined the harp as a symbol of Irish nationality.<sup>8</sup> Second, the critical point that we are dealing with human remains (and a skull at that), adding to our fascination with the item and its sacred nature: those who have written about the skull refer to it interchangeably as both a shrine and a relic. This 'entangled object'<sup>9</sup> makes the story of Carolan's skull 'different from other, similar objects'.<sup>10</sup> Although there is little that can compare to it in terms of uniqueness, the point of interest underpinning this paper is the question of how a single object can become the meeting point of significant national and cultural narratives.

### **<H1>The skull's journey: from the graveyard to the museum stores**

On his death in 1738 Carolan was buried in Kilronan Graveyard in County Roscommon. His funeral was a four-day 'royal wake', attended by local gentry, patrons and country folk with other Irish musicians providing a guard of honour.<sup>11</sup> The local priest (who died twelve years later) had made it known before his passing that he wished to be buried with the great musician. This was to be the first moment of symbolic meaning made with Carolan's remains: the priest ennobled through burial with the remains of the noted musician. When the grave was reopened for the priest's burial, Carolan's skull was removed and displayed in a niche in a nearby wall; it was distinguished from other skulls by a ribbon tied through a hole above one eye. Here the skull became 'an object of veneration', people visiting the church 'for the sole purpose of seeing this relic of a man so universally admired for his musical talents'.<sup>12</sup> The skull remained there for several decades, but by the end of the eighteenth century it had disappeared from Kilronan and various (sometimes contradictory) stories ensued concerning its loss.

Donal O'Sullivan in his study *Carolan: The life and times of an Irish harper* (1958), as well as providing the most definitive list of his compositions and how they have endured, describes Carolan's wake and burial and gives two accounts of the treatment of his remains. The first account refers to the idea that the skull was slowly destroyed by the attentions of visitors to the graveyard. O'Sullivan writes that while still in the graveyard, and displayed in the niche, locals visiting the skull scraped at the bone to make a powder that could be mixed with water and drunk as a cure for epilepsy – to the point that there barely anything of it remained. He cites a Mr Ellis who wrote in 1853 that he possessed the Carolan skull, claiming that a relative had taken the disintegrating skull when he visited the graveyard late one night,

1 thinking it was 'no sacrilege to put what remained in his pocket'.<sup>13</sup> The second account of the  
2 fate of the skull describes its destruction by a man on horseback, and this account has a  
3 number of versions. One describes a Northern man who, when shown the skull, 'discharged a  
4 loaded pistol and by which it was greatly disfigured. It was supposed he was a spiteful  
5 Orangeman'.<sup>14</sup> An even more vivid version, written in 1831 by James Hardiman the Queen's  
6 College Galway librarian, and author of *Irish Minstrelsy*, was cited by Donnellan in an article  
7 titled *Carolaniana* (1908). On this occasion, the 'Orangeman' asked to see the skull and when  
8 taken from the niche 'he discharged a loaded pistol at it, by which it was shattered to pieces.  
9 Then damming all Irish papists, he rode away'.<sup>15</sup> In yet another version the man on horseback  
10 was pursued by 'friends of the MacDermott Roe'; they succeeded in rescuing the skull and  
11 returned it to its rightful place in the graveyard where it was put back on display 'enclosed  
12 with strong iron bars'.<sup>16</sup> O'Sullivan, however, suggests this story of the Ulsterman on  
13 horseback should be 'dismissed as fabrication'.<sup>17</sup> Instead, he proposes that this account of the  
14 fate of the skull was forged to hide the fact that it was removed by one George Nugent  
15 Reynolds for the museum of antiquities created by Sir John Caldwell, of Castle Caldwell, who  
16 was also known to be an epileptic.<sup>18</sup> This was also Donnellan's belief: he confidently  
17 concluded, 'everything considered, it seems to me practically certain that the Castlecaldwell  
18 relic is the true and authentic one'.<sup>19</sup>

19 We need not doubt that a human skull was on display in the Castle Caldwell museum,  
20 between approximately 1796 and 1874,<sup>20</sup> and that the skull in the National Museum of  
21 Ireland is that same one (Fig. 2). In 1834 John O'Donovan, whilst working for the Ordnance  
22 Survey of Ireland, visited Major Bloomfield of Castle Caldwell and recorded the existence of a  
23 skull which, he recorded, was that of Carolan.<sup>21</sup> The collection in which it was housed was  
24 described by O'Donovan as 'a splendid one'.<sup>22</sup> At this point, the skull was still confidently  
25 identified as that of Carolan. O'Donovan expressed interest in taking the skull from Castle  
26 Caldwell so that it could be used to aid a sculptor creating a Carolan bust; this Major  
27 Bloomfield agreed to.<sup>23</sup> O'Donovan writes: 'The Major would let me have the skull as  
28 promised, for my temporary use, but as I had no box or portmanteau,<sup>24</sup> I would not wish to  
29 carry so curious a relic about with me'.<sup>25</sup> There is, however, no suggestion in later sources that  
30 O'Donovan ever returned for the skull.

31 It was still on display in Castle Caldwell when in 1852 the British Association for the  
32 Advancement of Science visited Belfast and on that occasion the skull was brought to the  
33 Belfast Museum for the benefit of the members.<sup>26</sup> It was exhibited again in 1853 at the Great  
34 Exhibition in Dublin, an event principally conceived as an opportunity to display prowess in  
35 art and industry, although gentry were invited to display their collections. The 1853 catalogue  
36 provides a snapshot of the collections in the grand houses of Ireland, each displayed for the  
37 other's admiration. James Bloomfield of Castle Caldwell provided an impressive collection of  
38 Chinese artefacts.<sup>27</sup> In the area designated for 'Relics of Ancient Art', Bloomfield displayed  
39 Carolan's skull alongside items as diverse as a 'felt hat, found in a bog', a 'curious hammer in  
40 handle', and a 'bronze spear of rare form'.<sup>28</sup> The Revd Canon MacIlwaine saw the skull at  
41 Castle Caldwell in 1870, when he visited along with the Belfast Naturalists Field Club. In his  
42 account he states that only a few years later the Caldwell Museum was dispersed by its  
43 proprietor, J. Rochfort Bloomfield. Bloomfield gave the skull to a Mr James Glenny who then  
44 gave it to his cousin John Glenny of Glenfield, Newry, to join his 'valuable antiquarian  
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collection'.<sup>29</sup> In July 1880 the Royal Historical and Archaeological Association of Ireland visited Belfast and the skull was again put on display, this time at the Belfast Museum. On that occasion MacIlwaine spoke to the membership about the skull, tracing its history, and referring to the numerous stories of its authenticity that had given rise 'to very warm debates and a variety of conjectures'. To dispel any doubt,<sup>30</sup> MacIlwaine declares 'I venture to express my decided opinion, if not my conviction, that the veritable skull of the last of Ireland's bards has survived destruction, and is now before us'.<sup>31</sup> At this time, with its place in an antiquarian collection and with an audience comprising members of learned societies, the skull of a man who had died only in the previous century, was treated as an ancient curiosity. As a last remnant of the musical genius, the skull continued to charm its viewers.

In response to the viewing of the skull, as documented in various nineteenth century sources, some queries arose regarding its phrenology. In the nineteenth century there was increasing interest in the external form of the human skull (as a reflection of the size and proportion of parts of the brain) as an aid to understanding the mind. It was thought, for example, that from the shape of the skull a person's aptitude for the arts, music or language could be judged.<sup>32</sup> On viewing the skull in 1852, MacStephen noted the size and development of the skull and on that basis expressed doubt that it could be that of the famed musician: 'I was particularly struck with its very small size and showing by its phrenological developments very little of a musical taste – and at the same time I had some doubts of its authenticity'.<sup>33</sup> Three decades later, when addressing the Historical and Archaeological Association of Ireland, the Revd MacIlwaine also refers to its diminutive size, as well as 'the defectiveness of its phrenological development, respect being had to the musical taste of its owner'.<sup>34</sup> He continues that this may well not discredit belief in the identity of the skull itself, for Carolan 'was of Keltic origin, and the crania of that race are not remarkable for their size'.<sup>35</sup>

By the end of the nineteenth century there was a widening awareness of the so-called skull of Carolan that had made its way from one collection to another. In 1896, in the *Ulster Journal of Archaeology*, Owen Smith published the following under 'Notes and Miscellanea':

<sm. Type>The Skull of Thurlough O'Carolan – I saw it state that, at the sale of the antiquarian collection of the late James Glenny of Newry, in Belfast March 1887, a human skull, said to be that of Thurlough O'Carolan, the Irish bard, was sold. Would some reader kindly state where that relic is now located, and what ground there is for the statement that it belonged to the bard?<sup>36</sup>

Smith demonstrates the continued interest in the skull, its whereabouts and authenticity. At the time of his enquiry the skull was making its way to a Masonic Lodge in Belfast. By then it was in the possession of Lodge member B. W. Montgomery, who purchased it from the executors of John Glenny. Donnellan visited Montgomery and on seeing the skull wrote an account of how it was displayed:

<sm. Type>It is kept in a large box painted black with a projecting back in which there are two nail holes, evidently intended to secure the box to a wall after the fashion of a wall-pocket. The skull itself is in a fine state of preservation, but the lower jawbone is missing . . . there are two holes, made by design or accident, one of which is over the right orbit towards the nose . . . Mr Montgomery, though he did not know the story or the motive of the perforation, told me that there was a piece of string or ribbon through this hole when he purchased the skull.<sup>37</sup>



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3       *The First Hundred Years of the Ark Masonic Lodge No. X* (1962) records that an  
4 emergency meeting of the Lodge was held at which Montgomery stated that he wished to  
5 offer the skull to the Lodge, 'as he ventured to think that as an interesting relic and emblem of  
6 mortality it might form a not inappropriate portion of the furniture of the Lodge. The W. M.  
7 [Worshipful Master] accepted the skull on behalf of the Lodge'.<sup>38</sup> Here the skull becomes the  
8 *memento mori* of the Masonic Order, a symbolic reminder of mortality. Another source  
9 suggests that, whilst in possession of the Lodge, the skull was 'accorded the reverence shown  
10 to the Lia Fail, the Stone of Destiny, once used at Tara in the inauguration of the High King'.<sup>39</sup>

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12       Even if it was held in such high accord, there is a suggestion that some felt the Masonic  
13 Lodge was not the rightful resting place for such an object. Donnellan cites a letter in the  
14 *Freeman's Journal*, written by Dr Grattan Flood lamenting its location.<sup>40</sup> Grattan Flood, then an  
15 eminent musician and composer, suggested 'is it not a deplorable state of affairs to find  
16 O'Carolan's skull reposing in a Masonic Lodge in Belfast . . . surely such a relic ought to be  
17 acquired for the National Museum'.<sup>41</sup> Donnellan had similar thoughts, for on viewing the skull  
18 in the Masonic Lodge in 1908 he records:

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23       <sm. Type>As I covered it with the piece of canvas in which it was enveloped, the thought involuntarily rose in  
24 my mind that McCabe the poet and harper – Carolan's lifelong friend – would have shrieked a wilder keen that  
25 his bones were thus scattered and would have pleaded passionately in his elegy for its restoration to Kilronan  
26 again.<sup>42</sup>

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29       Donnellan continues with an exploration of the legacy of Carolan and concludes with a  
30 declaration of the national importance of the skull, his choice of wording reflecting the  
31 sentiment of the period:

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34       <sm. Type>What is almost to a certainty the skull of the blind genius should be regarded as one of our national  
35 treasures . . . An effort should be made to acquire for the National Museum the shell in which floated those  
36 haunting melodies which will continue to delight Eire through the ages.<sup>43</sup>

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38       The National Museum of Ireland has in its files a letter from H.B. White, Second Officer  
39 and Chief Clerk, Institutions of Science and Art, dated 19 September 1908, to Brother B.W.D.  
40 Montgomery of the Masonic Lodge, requesting information about Carolan's skull. It seems that  
41 the museum had some interest in acquiring the skull. The letter states 'the museum here has a  
42 very good collection of Irish made Harps and if it were possible the Director would like to  
43 have the Skull referred on loan or otherwise'.<sup>44</sup> Montgomery replies stating that the skull is  
44 now in the possession of the Lodge. He also informs White (who is referred to as 'Dear Sir and  
45 Brother' indicating Montgomery is writing to a fellow Mason) that interest in the skull has  
46 been expressed by others, and that there is a suggestion it should be reburied:

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51       <sm. Type>During the summer I received a letter from Dr Grattan Flood of Enniscorthy who asked if he could see  
52 the skull and suggested that it might perhaps be handed over to be replaced in O'Carolan's grave. I brought his  
53 letter before the Lodge which did not come to any decision and I shall bring your letter forward at the next  
54 meeting.<sup>45</sup>

The museum has no further record of how the skull got into its collection, or the exact year they acquired it. *The First Hundred Years of the Ark Masonic Lodge X* states that, after some debate, the Lodge members agreed that the skull should be donated to the Royal Irish Academy in Dublin. Records have not survived that document that debate, but it would be reasonable to assume that with the political turmoil of the 1920s any suggestion that the object should be transferred from Northern Ireland to the Irish Free State would not have found easy agreement. Although the approach for the Carolan skull had been made by the National Museum of Ireland, in the event it was to the Royal Irish Academy that it was donated. In the early 1900s, under the directorship of George Noble Plunkett, the museum was gaining a greater sense of its identity as an Irish national institution. By 1916, however, Plunkett lost his directorship when his son was executed for involvement in the Easter Rising.<sup>46</sup> These circumstances may well have rendered the museum an institution to which the Belfast Masonic Lodge was not prepared to support, and with a member of the Academy amongst its brethren, it was to that institution that the Lodge made its approach. The correspondence is recorded in the minutes of the Academy as follows:<sup>47</sup>

<sm. Type>

Monday 3 May 1926

Read the following letter

Ardaluin Newcastle Co. Down

April 21 '26

To the Secretary of the RIA

Sir

For many years past the skull of Turlough O'Carolan, the 17<sup>th</sup>–18<sup>th</sup> century Irish bard has been in possession of Ark Lodge X (Freemasons) Belfast. Having been deposited there by our late V.W. [Very Worshipful] Brother Boughey W. Montgomery who rescued it when it was exposed to the ignominy of public sale. A certain amount of sentiment and feeling has always excited about this skull and the Lodge are informed that it is of great scientific interest being the only authenticated skull of a member of the bardic order.

Under the above circumstances the W.M. the Wardens and Brethren of Ark Lodge X have decided to offer O'Carolan's skull together with scientific reports and such information and relics as can be collected to be vested in the President and the Members of the RIA for retention inside the Academy and to be held by them as part of the property of the RIA. It is understood that the RIA will not part with it to anyone without the consent of Lodge X and in the event of the RIA being wound up or have to transfer their property to any other person or body the O'Carolan skull is to be returned to Lodge X.

The costs connected with the collection of material and a suitable case will be borne by Lodge X.

On behalf of Ark Lodge X I have been authorized by the W.M. to make this offer, subject to above conditions, and would be glad to know if the Council of the RIA are prepared to accept the skull on the conditions stated.

Yours faithfully

R. G. Berry, Colonel, MRJA

The letter reveals how the Masonic members responded to the skull. In their mind they had rescued it from the 'ignominy of public sale' – clearly inappropriate for such a relic; amongst the membership the skull was held in high esteem. By January 1927 Carolan's skull had been presented to the RIA and on that date was displayed at Academy House in Dublin: the Academy's minutes record that 'the skull of Carolan, the last of the Irish Bards, presented by the Ark Masonic Lodge No. X, with documentary evidence of authenticity, was exhibited'. The scoring out of the reference to 'documentary evidence of authenticity' in the minutes,



written by Robert Macalister, then Professor of Celtic Archaeology at University College Dublin, suggests that there may have been some issue with the quality of that evidence. Nevertheless, the Academy accepted the skull and, at some point thereafter, relocated it to the National Museum of Ireland. By 1926 the important archaeological collection created by the Academy had already been transferred to the Dublin museum, so the decision that the Carolan skull should follow comes as no surprise. Whether that arrangement contradicts the conditions of the transfer from the Masonic Lodge is untested, although the circumstances explain why, to this day, the skull is labelled with a temporary museum number and has no accession record.<sup>48</sup>

### <H1>Carolan ghost

Perhaps one of the most curious stories that can be associated with Carolan's skull is that told by Paddy Tunney in his book of reminiscences and music, capturing his own life in early twentieth-century west Fermanagh. His is the story of the headless ghost of Carolan haunting Castle Caldwell in search of his head. Although this 'moment in the history of the thing' could be read as a humorous indulgence there is some value in it since it both provides an insight into why the memory of Carolan remains locally and links superstitions of the eighteenth century with those of a more modern time. Tunney begins by giving an account of the drowning of Denis McCabe, a musician and friend of Carolan.<sup>49</sup> In 1770, out on a barge with Carolan and others on Lough Erne, County Fermanagh, on an evening when all the revellers had drunk too much, McCabe fell off the boat: 'there was no one on board sober enough to rescue him and so he drowned'.<sup>50</sup> In memory of McCabe, Sir James Caldwell erected a limestone monument in the shape of a violin. Going forward to the early 1900s another Fermanagh musician, flute player James McGinley, 'struck up a rollicking reel-playing partnership' with a local fiddler called Billy. Both men decided they would distil poteen (an illegal alcohol) and, because the 'country was crawling with customs men and police', their chosen 'safe hideout' was 'the vaults under the old castle [Castle Caldwell] . . . an eerie spot lonely and remote'. The men enjoyed the poteen and played their fiddles on All Souls' Night, and 'while devout women and pious old men made visits to the church for the souls in Purgatory, our heroes set about releasing other spirits in the vaults of Castlecaldwell'.<sup>51</sup> Billy had just finished his first tune when, as Tunney describes:

<sm. Type>

Two strange figures crossed the threshold of light at the far end of the vaults. One of them wore a long, black cloak with a hood. The other sported a swallow-tail and knickerbockers.

McGinley's first impulse was to bolt past the strangers for it struck him that they might be police in disguise but then, to his horror, he notices that the man in the cloak had no head and the hood covered only a scrawny stump of a neck. He was petrified with fear. This was All Souls' Night. Could these be visitors from another world?

Billy, on the other hand, launched out into a medley of reels and the swallow-tailed and knickerbockered one began to whistle the tunes along with him. "Do you play?" Billy made bold to ask, at the same time reaching him the fiddle. "I used to", came the reply, "but I haven't lifted a fiddle for years". He took the fiddle and returned it. It was then the poteen makers heard The Boys of the Lough played in the manner and with a plaintiveness that would draw tears from a stone and at the same time set every toe in the parish tapping . . .

"Damn it! Man, you're powerful", Billy blurted out, no longer able to contain his admiration, you could draw music from the Stone Fiddle below at the gatehouse."

"No fiddler ever played on his tombstone", the stranger gave him back

1 "Come on, Terry, your skull is no longer here. If it was I would have found it long ago. Keep McCabe's  
2 music alive, Billy, Good Night!" And their visitors vanished.<sup>52</sup>

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5 Here, in a tale well told, Tunney is recounting the story of two men seeing the ghosts of  
6 the fiddler McCabe, who cannot play on his tombstone (the stone fiddle erected in his  
7 memory), and that of Turlough Carolan. Carolan appears as a headless ghost hoping, with this  
8 return to Castle Caldwell, to be reunited with his skull. By this stage the skull has been taken  
9 from the county and his companion advises that 'your skull is no longer here'.<sup>53</sup> This ghost  
10 story has endured in the local area. In 1995 David Wilson, assistant Professor of Celtic Studies  
11 at the University of Toronto, published a book of his musings based on his travels around  
12 Ireland on a bicycle – included in which is Pat Tunney's account of the Carolan ghost. Wilson  
13 comments on the continuing legacy of the Carolan story: 'to this day, you hear tales that the  
14 skull rests in an Orange Lodge in Belfast, where it has supposedly been incorporated into  
15 obscure masonic rituals',<sup>54</sup> demonstrating that the memory of Carolan's skull endures locally.  
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## 20 <H1>Conclusion

21 The journey of the skull removed from a rural graveyard in the west of Ireland in the 1750s,  
22 and now stored in the National Museum in Dublin demonstrates the value of the object  
23 biography approach. In the decades since the opening of Carolan's grave, and in each phase of  
24 its biography, the accounts of Carolan's skull demonstrate how the living are attracted to the  
25 human remains of the dead. This enduring fascination encompasses the power of superstition,  
26 veneration and the making of myth. Phase one (opening the grave), which triggered the entire  
27 account, begins with the priest making known that he wished his own remains to rest with  
28 those of the musician. The myth of Carolan had begun, and this priest was extending his  
29 biography through memory by association. The second phase (display of the skull) allowed  
30 opportunity for people to come and view the remains of the musician – a ready spectacle for  
31 those visiting the graveyard. It should be no surprise that the stories of what happened the  
32 skull once on display vary – ranging from its destruction by a man on horseback to the skull  
33 being ground and used for medicinal purposes. Regarding the latter, distillations of human  
34 bone as a cure for epilepsy had been commonplace in Europe since the medieval period;<sup>55</sup>  
35 furthermore, belief in such cures was an established part of Irish folk medicine that still  
36 endures in some places.<sup>56</sup> Writing about Ireland in 1938, Eileen Hickey describes such  
37 superstitions, one of which may have been the fate of the Carolan skull:  
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44 <sm. Type>Boils may be readily cured by a blacksmith who is the seventh son of a blacksmith. He has merely to  
45 open and shut his tongs three times in front of the boil, without even touching it. Ringworm may be speedily  
46 cured by the blood of a black cat. Any person can acquire the power to cure a burn by licking it, provided that he  
47 has previously licked the under-surface of a lizard from tail to head. Epilepsy being a very unpleasant malady,  
48 one is in order in expecting a somewhat unpleasant cure, but luckily it is nothing worse than to partake of some  
49 milk which has been boiled in a human skull.<sup>57</sup>  
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51 The rival account told by Hardiman in 1831 of the removal of the skull by a 'spiteful  
52 Orangeman', escaping whilst 'damming all Papists', is more a reflection of his time of writing  
53 than of what might have happened in that rural graveyard in the late 1700s. The term  
54 'Orangeman' emerges from the rise of the self-styled 'Orange Boys', who led disturbances in  
55 County Armagh in 1795 and 1796, and the formation of the Orange Order in 1795.<sup>58</sup> It is  
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unlikely this disorder spilled over into a County Roscommon graveyard. Additionally, given the popularity of Carolan in his lifetime amongst the Protestant gentry and middle classes, it is doubtful any destruction of the skull would have had a sectarian motive. O'Sullivan concludes this 'spiteful Orangeman' is very likely a fabrication. This version is still, however, worth noting: it tells us how the social and political turmoil of the early 1800s shaped the narrative of the Carolan's skull.

Of the sources consulted from the 1800s and 1900s that tell the stories of phases three (in the Caldwell and Newry collections) and four (in the Belfast Masonic Lodge), there are small variances in the account of the removal of the skull from the graveyard and its journey to the Dublin museum. Despite differences of opinion regarding the authenticity of the skull, the skull displayed at Castle Caldwell was believed to be that of Carolan. Throughout the nineteenth century, and in different venues, it was displayed as such. Again, the political context of the period influences the record – a Belfast Lodge is thought an inappropriate location for an Irish bard. In keeping with the period, the skull is spoken of as 'a national treasure, relic and shrine' and perhaps most eloquently by Donnellan who wrote of the skull as 'the shell in which floated those haunting melodies which will continue to delight Eire'.<sup>59</sup> The range of stories and associated sentiment is captured in an account by the Very Revd M. J. Canon Masterson, published in 1929, describing the exhumation of the skull by the Hon. Thomas Dillon (brother of the Earl of Roscommon), its display in the graveyard, and then its disappearance in 1796:

<sm. Type>And a host of rumours grew up and excited the minds of the neighbours, and of many others, until all doubts were dispelled in our own day by the erudition and devotion of Chevalier Grattan-Flood, who has traced the relic successively to Castle Caldwell, thence to a museum in Belfast, and one of the last services this renowned scholar and artist rendered to our national bard was to have this priceless relic transferred (1926) to a fitting shrine in the National Museum, Dublin.<sup>60</sup>

Masterson's description reveals the emotions aroused by Carolan's skull. He suggests that Grattan Flood performed a national service by having the relic transferred to the National Museum. Although the credit accorded to Flood for the relocation of the skull from Belfast to Dublin fails to match with the records cited above, Masterson's statement demonstrates that, underpinning all those twists and turns, is the thinking that this is a 'priceless relic' and that once in a national museum it achieves the status of a shrine (Fig. 2) (entering phase five of its biography). Displayed in its glass case, Carolan's skull enters the macabre but long-established practice of human remains preserved as relics, either on view or encased in a reliquary.<sup>61</sup> More often associated with the bones of Catholic saints, in this case a revered musician was given this sometime controversial accolade. In the Post-Reformation period the 'Catholic relic' was a target for attack and ridicule, but interest remained for those who could re-envision (or reinvent) such a relic as a historical artefact. Alexandra Wallsam writes that 'this was a society in which the same item could simultaneously be a focus of spiritual reverence, an historical object that could arouse the intellectual interest of those who repudiated relic worship, and a source of aesthetic pleasure'.<sup>62</sup> It will be evident the Carolan skull satisfied all three of these responses.

The enduring legacy of Carolan in Ireland is interwoven with the growth of nationalism in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which adopted the harp as the 'mute

symbol'<sup>63</sup> for Irish nationality and sustained interest in the bard through the centuries. When the United Irishmen formed in the 1790s they adopted a harp as their emblem, establishing it as 'the true voice of the real Ireland'.<sup>64</sup> According to Joep Leerssen, soon after the death of Carolan the mythology surrounding his life began to emerge, establishing him as 'the presiding genius' over the harp festivals of the period and as the 'cardinal figure' mediating between Irish cultures. This continued into the nineteenth century when the idea of Carolan was to be 'assiduously cultivated' to the point that he became 'the prototype for the romantic image of the Gaelic artist'.<sup>65</sup> Enthusiasts were eager to be associated with the legacy of Carolan: Lady Stanley Morgan (author of *The Wild Irish Girl*) left a bequest for the marble plaque that can be seen today on the north aisle of St Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin.<sup>66</sup> More recently a monument in memory of Carolan, sculpted by Oisín Kelly, was erected in Mohill, County Leitrim in 1986<sup>67</sup> and another, in 2002, at his birthplace in Nobber, County Roscommon. Carolan was commemorated on an Irish £50 banknote (Series B 1976-1982) and is remembered annually at the O'Carolan Harp Festival in Keadue County Roscommon, which was established in 1978, 250 years after his death.<sup>68</sup> In 1988 the O'Carolan Commemoration Committee wrote to the National Museum of Ireland requesting the loan of Carolan's skull for display at 'a festival in his honour' to be held in Nobber in that year, a request that was granted by the museum.<sup>69</sup> In 2008 the museum briefly displayed the skull in Dublin, at the request of the Turlough O'Carolan society to mark their Twenty-first Harp festival.

Today the skull has the potential for use in the exploration of contemporary attitudes to human remains in museum collections,<sup>70</sup> and in revisiting the question posed by Grattan Flood that it should be reburied. All in all – since we cannot be entirely sure that the skull is that of Carolan – the rightful burial might remain a subject of some disagreement. It is an intriguing object and, although it has not the national (let alone international) significance of other items in Irish museums, it is one that will remain in the national collection: it will survive because of its materiality (a human skull) and because of its objectification. As it is, held in the national museum store in the glass case prepared by the Belfast Masonic Lodge, it is a reminder of our fascination with the macabre, our tendency to identify relics with moments of veneration, and the importance of museums as places that offer shelter to our many follies.

### Captions

Fig. 1. The Carolan skull in the case commissioned by the members of the Belfast Masonic Lodge No. X. (Photo © National Museum of Ireland).

Fig. 2. The Carolan skull, side profile National Museum of Ireland (Photo © National Museum of Ireland).

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Notes and references

<sup>1</sup> In some sources the bard is referred to as Carolan and in other sources O'Carolan: Carolan is favoured here, except where O'Carolan is used in the source cited.

<sup>2</sup> An informative outline of his life is provided by Breandan O Madagain in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/20484> accessed 7 May 2018).

<sup>3</sup> J. Trimble, 'Carolan and his patrons in Fermanagh and neighbouring areas' *Clogher Record* 10 no. 1 (1979), pp. 26-50, at p. 29.

<sup>4</sup> See for instance, S. Joyce (2011) *Transforming Carolan*, Unpublished PhD thesis submitted to the University of Limerick. Perhaps the most remarkable evidence of his legacy is the account provided by Brian Keenan who, when held hostage in Beirut between April 1986 and August 1990, 'was visited and sustained by the presence of Turlough O'Carolan'. This inspired his novel *Turlough*, published in 2011 (<https://www.penguin.co.uk/books/1031413/turlough/> accessed 19 April 2018).

Read more at <https://www.penguin.co.uk/books/1031413/turlough/#UQjGVxHluXwvCjyl.99> accessed 7 May 2018).

<sup>5</sup> I. Kopytoff, 'The cultural biography of things: commoditization as process', *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in cultural perspective* 68 (1986), pp. 70-73.

<sup>6</sup> S.J.M.M. Alberti, 'Objects and the museum', *Isis* 96 (2005), pp. 559-71, at p. 560.

<sup>7</sup> T. C. Barnard, *Making the Grand Figure: Lives and possessions in Ireland, 1641-1770* (New Haven, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> J. Hutchinson, *The Dynamics of Cultural Nationalism. The Gaelic revival and the creation of the Irish nation state* (London, 1987); S. C. Lanier, "'It is new-strung and shan't be heard": nationalism and memory in the Irish harp tradition', *British Journal of Ethnomusicology* 8 no. 1 (1999), pp. 1-26; J. Leerssen, *Remembrance and Imagination. Patterns in the historical and literary representation of Ireland in the nineteenth century* (Cork, 1996).

<sup>9</sup> N. Thomas, *Entangled Objects: Exchange, material culture, and colonialism in the Pacific* (Cambridge, MA, 2009).

<sup>10</sup> Alberti, op. cit. (note 6), p. 560.

<sup>11</sup> Trimble, op. cit. (note 3), p. 49; The description as a 'royal wake' is taken from the text accompanying the display of the skull 25 September – 12 October 2008 at the National Museum of Ireland.

<sup>12</sup> L. Donnellan, 'Carolaniana', *Journal of the County Louth Archaeological Society* 2 no. 1 (1908), pp. 62-71, at p. 63

<sup>13</sup> D. O'Sullivan, *Carolan. The life, times and music of an Irish harper* (London, 1958), p. 77; Trimble refers to this in her article, noting that the whereabouts of the Ellis skull is unknown (Trimble, op. cit. (note 3), p. 50).

<sup>14</sup> O'Sullivan, op. cit. (note 13) p. 74; 'Orangeman' refers to the exclusively Protestant organization that marks the victory of the Protestant King William III over the Catholic King James II in Ireland in 1690.



<sup>15</sup> Donnellan, op. cit. (note 12) p. 63; J. Hardiman, *Irish Minstrelsy, or Bardic Remains of Ireland with English Poetical Translations. Vol. 1* (London: Joseph Robins 1831, Facsimile Shannon: Irish University Press 1971).

<sup>16</sup> Donnellan, op. cit. (note 12) p. 62.

<sup>17</sup> O'Sullivan, op. cit. (note 13), p. 74.

<sup>18</sup> When John Caldwell died in 1839 his estate was inherited by his daughter Frances, who in 1817 married John Colpoys Bloomfield of Tipperary (O'Sullivan op. cit. (note 12), p. 76; O'Sullivan refers to Caldwell as an epileptic p. 74).

<sup>19</sup> Donnellan op. cit. (note 12), p. 64; The Donnellan article includes two photographs of the skull (p. 68)

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 62

<sup>21</sup> Letter from O'Donovan dated 31 October 1834 ('Letters containing information relative to the antiquities of the County of Fermanagh', typescript, University of Ulster Library, Coleraine Campus 4 Morris collection DA990.F43026). A description of this collection is also given by Lieutenant Robert Boteler in May 1835: A. Day and P. McWilliams (eds), *Ordnance Survey Memoirs of Ireland: Parishes of County Fermanagh*, vol. II: 1834-5, *Lower Lough Erne* (Belfast 1992), p. 3

<sup>22</sup> J. B. Cunningham, *The Letters of John O'Donovan from Fermanagh* (Belleek, 1993), p. 42.

<sup>23</sup> Major Bloomfield married the daughter of Sir John Caldwell.

<sup>24</sup> Large suitcase

<sup>25</sup> Cunningham, op. cit. (note 22), p. 47.

<sup>26</sup> *Descriptive Catalogue of the Collection of Antiquities, and Other Objects, Illustrative of Irish History, Exhibited in the Museum, Belfast, on the occasion of the twenty-second meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science* (Belfast, 1852); *Belfast NewsLetter*, 13 September 1852; J. Windele, *The Irish Antiquities of the National Exhibition* (Cork, 1852).

<sup>27</sup> Listed on p. 126. The original catalogue can be accessed at:

<sup>28</sup> <https://archive.org/stream/officialcatalogu00exhi#page/126/mode/2up>

<sup>29</sup> Listed on pp. 142-3 of the catalogue

<sup>30</sup> Revd W. MacIlwaine, 'Notes on a human skull, held to be the skull of Carolan, *Journal of the Historical and Archaeological Association of Ireland* 4<sup>th</sup> ser. 5, pt. 2 (1880), pp. 304-307.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 305.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 307.

<sup>33</sup> T. M. Parssinen, 'Popular science and society: the phrenology movement in early Victorian Britain', *Journal of Social History* 8 no. 1 (1974), pp. 1-20.

<sup>34</sup> MacStephen, 'Carolan's skull. With a note by George Ellis', *Ulster Journal of Archaeology* 1st ser. 1 (1853), p. 226.

<sup>35</sup> MacIlwaine, op. cit. (note 29), p. 306.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 306.

<sup>37</sup> O. Smith, (1896) 'Query concerning the skull of Turlogh O'Carolan', *Ulster Journal of Archaeology* 2 no. 2 (1896), p. 216.

<sup>38</sup> Donnellan, op. cit. (note 12), p. 64.

<sup>39</sup> *The First Hundred Years of the Ark Masonic Lodge No. X* (Belfast, 1962); A. McClelland, 'The Carolan skull', in *The Lodge of Research Transactions* 16 (c.1928), pp. 155-7, at p. 156.

<sup>40</sup> P. Tunney, *The Stone Fiddle: My way to traditional song* (Dublin, 1979), p. 33. In this source it is said that the skull was in a 'most select Orange Lodge' rather than Masonic Lodge.

<sup>41</sup> W. H. Grattan Flood, *A History of Irish Music* (Dublin, 1905). William Henry Grattan Flood (1859-1928), author, historian and composer.

<sup>42</sup> Donnellan, op. cit. (note 12).

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 64.



<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 71.

<sup>44</sup> Carolan letter file, National Museum of Ireland.

<sup>45</sup> Carolan letter file, National Museum of Ireland.

<sup>46</sup> E. Crooke, *Politics, archaeology and creation of a national museum of Ireland* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2000)

<sup>47</sup> Royal Irish Academy Minutes, 22 March 1926.

<sup>48</sup> HH: 2013.67 (temp).

<sup>49</sup> This is the same McCabe referred to by Donnellan, op. cit. (note 12) at p. 64.

<sup>50</sup> Tunney op. cit. (note 39), p. 34.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., pp. 35-6.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 36.

<sup>54</sup> D. A. Wilson, *Ireland. A bicycle and a tin whistle* (Montreal, 1995), p. 107.

<sup>55</sup> R. Sugg, 'Medicinal cannibalism in early modern literature and culture', *Literature Compass* 10 no. 11 (2013), pp. 825-35.

<sup>56</sup> M. Dowd, 'Bewitched by an elf dart: fairy archaeology, folk magic and traditional medicine in Ireland', *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* (2018), pp. 1-23.

<sup>57</sup> E. Hickey, 'Medical superstitions in Ireland', *Ulster Medical Journal* 7 no. 4 (1938), pp. 268-70.

<sup>58</sup> S. Farrell. *Ritual and Riots: Sectarian Violence and Political Culture in Ulster 1784-1886*. (Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2000).

<sup>59</sup> Donnellan, op. cit. (note 12), p. 71.

<sup>60</sup> Revd M. J. Masterson, "Turlough O'Carolan "the last of the Irish Bards", with a poem entitled "Lines on the grave of O'Carolan", *Journal of Ardagh and Clonmacnoise Antiquarian Society* Vol. 1 no. 2 (1929), pp. 74-90; no. 3 (1932), pp. 47-64, 88-93.

<sup>61</sup> J. Geisbusch, 'For your eyes only? The magic touch of relics', in S. Dudley, ed. (2012) *Museum Objects. Experiencing the properties of things* (London, 2007), pp. 202-213.

<sup>62</sup> A. Walsham, 'Skeletons in the cupboard: relics after the English Reformation', *Past and Present* 206 suppl. 5 (2010), pp. 121-43.

<sup>63</sup> Lanier, op. cit. (note 8), p. 21

<sup>64</sup> Leerssen, op. cit. (note 8), p. 59.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 175.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 59.

<sup>67</sup> For an account of the creation of this memorial see <http://www.mohillparish.ie/turlough.htm> (accessed 7 May 2018).

<sup>68</sup> Information on the festival available at <http://www.ocarolanharpfestival.ie/about.html> (accessed 7 May 2018). For a flavour of the commemorative festival, see this description provided by Eileen Battersby, 'O'Carolan remembered in harpers' tributes to legendary blind Irish bard', *Irish Times*, 2 May 2006.

<sup>69</sup> Patrick Lewis to Mr Teehan, Keeper of Art and Industrial Division, Carolan unnumbered letter file, 4 February 1988. National Museum of Ireland.

<sup>70</sup> S.J.M.M. Alberti, P. Bienkowski, M. J. Chapman and R. Drew, 'Should we display the dead?', *Museum and Society* 7 no. 3 (2009), pp. 133-49.



Figure 2: Carolan Skull (Copyright National Museum of Ireland)